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The changing impact of motherhood on employment across generations of Canadian women

Research Brief No. 5

Summary

Women's work histories are closely interwoven with motherhood, as shown by previous studies that have examined Canadian women's family histories in relation to their movements of entry into—and exit from—the labour market.

These studies have either supported or reinforced, at least implicitly, the existence of an incompatibility between motherhood and paid work.

The results of these studies are interesting in that they provided a broad picture of how Canadian women adapted their work lives according to family events. However, the image they reveal is static and incomplete, failing to highlight the changes experienced among recent generations of women.

We examined the relationships between motherhood and women's entry and exit from the workplace and how it has evolved across the generations, by studying women born between 1937 and 1976. Studying the various generations of women allows us to consider a range of possible strategies open to women, given the constraints and opportunities of institutional and social settings across generations.

These changes are studied on the basis of retrospective data from Statistics Canada's 2001 General Social Survey on family history.

Key Findings

We found that:

- The relative impact of motherhood on the key stages of women's work lives is far from stable across generations.
- The rate of entry into first employment is consistently lower for women with children, regardless of the number of children.
- Women of more recent generations who have two or more children are less likely to return to work, in comparison with childless women and mothers of an only child.

Data

We use Statistics Canada's 2001 General Social Survey (GSS) on 'family history' for our research. The survey includes all individuals over the age of 15 who were living in the 10 Canadian provinces, excluding Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut. In total there were 24,310 respondents (10,664 men and 13,646 women).

The GSS collected information on the work and family histories of each person surveyed, allowing us to reconstruct their job and jobless histories, the history of all their conjugal unions including both common law relationships or marriages, and their complete parental history, including biological, adopted and step-children. By combining all of this information, we are able to examine to what extent the different conjugal and parental situations experienced by women over the course of their lives affect their patterns of entry into and exit from the labour market.

The final sample includes just over 8,300 women, aged 25 to 64 at the time of the survey.





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Findings

In the full paper we report estimates of a regression model for each of our three work transitions under study (see Box 1), that contains all of the variables shown in Box 2 plus interactions between birth cohort and parental status.

Box 1: Work transitions under study

We distinguish between three possible successive transitions in women's professional histories:

- 1) entry into first employment (either full-time or part-time, after finishing school, and lasting at least six months);
- 2) exit from (or interruption of) the first job for at least 3 months; and
- 3) return into employment after the first work interruption.

Box 2: Variables included in the analyses

- Birth cohort (1937-1946; 1947-1956; 1957-1966; 1967-1976)
- *Parental status* (no children; one child; two children or more)
- *Conjugal Status* (single – without partner; married; common-law union)
- *At least two months pregnant* (yes; no)
- *Enrolled in school* (yes; no)
- *Living in parental home* (yes; no)
- *Highest diploma obtained* (less than high school; high school; non university post-secondary; university)
- *Economic context* (stable or favourable period; difficult period)
- Mother tongue (English; French; English and French; other)
- Place of birth (Canada; Outside of Canada)
- Region of residence (Atlantic provinces; Quebec; Ontario; Western Canada)
- Years of work experience (only included in the return to work model)
- Age at first entry into employment (only included in the work interruption model)

Time-varying variables are in italics.

The main findings are shown in three figures (see next page) illustrating the effects of motherhood on women's work transitions across generations.

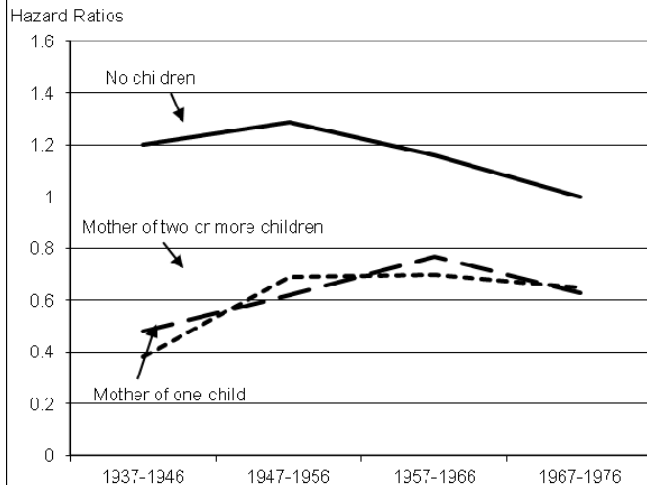
Parenthood and entry into first employment:

Figure 1 shows that women who gave birth to one or more children before starting their work lives have significantly lower risks of entering into the labour market, and this no matter the generation considered.



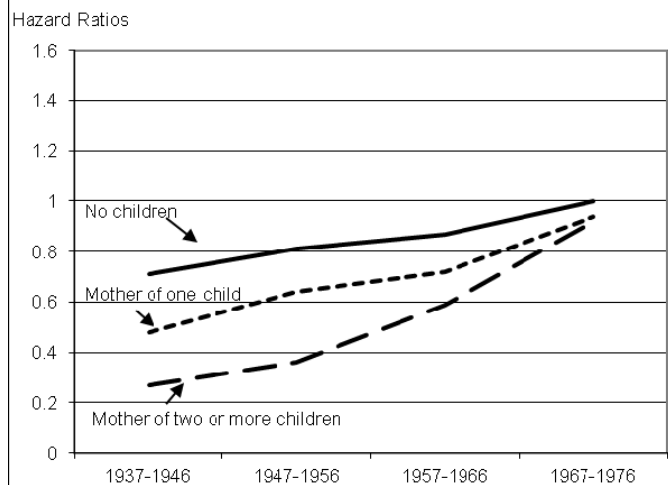
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Figure 1: Impact, by Birth Cohort, of Parental Status on the Risk of Entering into Employment



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

Figure 2: Impact, by Birth Cohort, of Parental Status on the Risk of Work Interruption



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

Parenthood and exit from (or interruption from) first employment:

The examination of the changing impact of parental status across generations reveals an increase of the risk of work interruption for women who had started working before having children (Figure 2). It also points to a marked decline across generations of the gap separating mothers (of one or more children) from childless women.

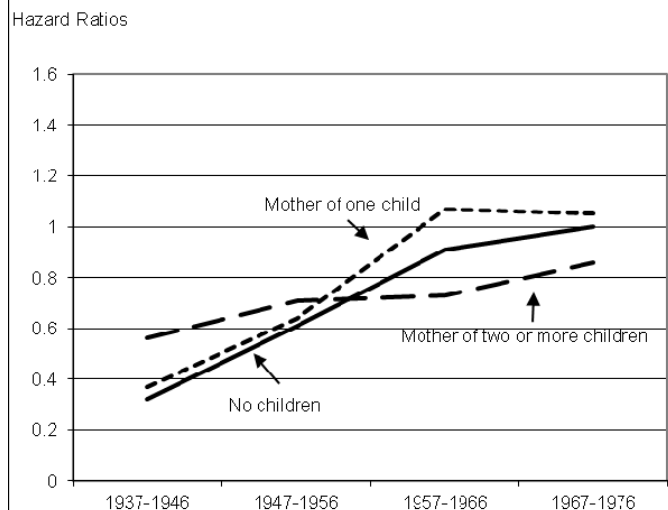
Among the generation of women born between 1937 and 1946, mothers of an only child had nearly half the risk of leaving the labour market for at least three months, compared to childless women, and those with two or more children had two and a half times less chances to leave the labour market. By comparison, the gap separating mothers and childless women has narrowed to less than 10 per cent in the youngest birth cohorts.

Parenthood and return to work:

There are marked differences across generations in the effects of parental status on return to employment (Figure 3). Both childless women and mothers of an only child have seen their likelihood of re-entering the labour market increase across generations, and no significant difference separates the two groups, no matter the generation.

The situation is quite different for mothers of two or more children. In the 1937-1946 generations, these women had a higher risk of return into employment than those who had one or no children. For women born 20 years later, the relationship had reversed, with mothers of two or more children being less likely to return to the labour market.

Figure 3: Impact, by Birth Cohort, of Parental Status on the Risk of Returning to Employment



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey 2001.



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Policy Implications

Two important, albeit tentative, policy implications can be drawn from our findings.

- First, we did not observe any notable decrease over generations in the gap separating mothers' and childless women's risk of entry in the labour market.

Changing mentalities with regards to mothers' work, as well as the increased availability of daycare services and part-time employment, do not seem to have greatly facilitated the balancing of work and motherhood, at least for this particular group of women. However, this result could be due to a selection effect, in that women who have children before initially entering the labour market may have unobserved specific characteristics, such as more traditional attitudes towards family and work.

- Second, the most striking result concerns mothers of at least two children for whom we observed a reversal in hazard ratios relative to those of childless women between the oldest and youngest generations. Hence, the fact of having at least two children rather than being childless, which was linked to a higher risk of return to employment in the older generations, was associated with a lower risk to do so among the younger generations.

It is plausible to argue that these changes are linked to the development in Canada of longer protected and paid maternal leaves that have enabled a growing number of mothers to remain at home for a longer period of time.

The analysis of women's employment trajectories by cohort is important if we hope to better predict the behaviours that they are likely to adopt in the future.

Women's employment has become the focus of special attention by policy makers, as Canada is expected to experience an accelerated aging of its overall population and a stagnation of its working age population. The increased participation in the labour market of mothers, who traditionally had lower employment rates, is now perceived as a means of reducing the scope and economic impact of these phenomena.

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About the study

This policy brief is based on Pacaut, Philippe, Celine Le Bourdais and Benoit Laplante, "The Changing Impact of Conjugal Status and Motherhood on Employment across Generations of Canadian Women", *Canadian Studies in Population* 38(3-4): 105-132. The brief was prepared by Alana Power.

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